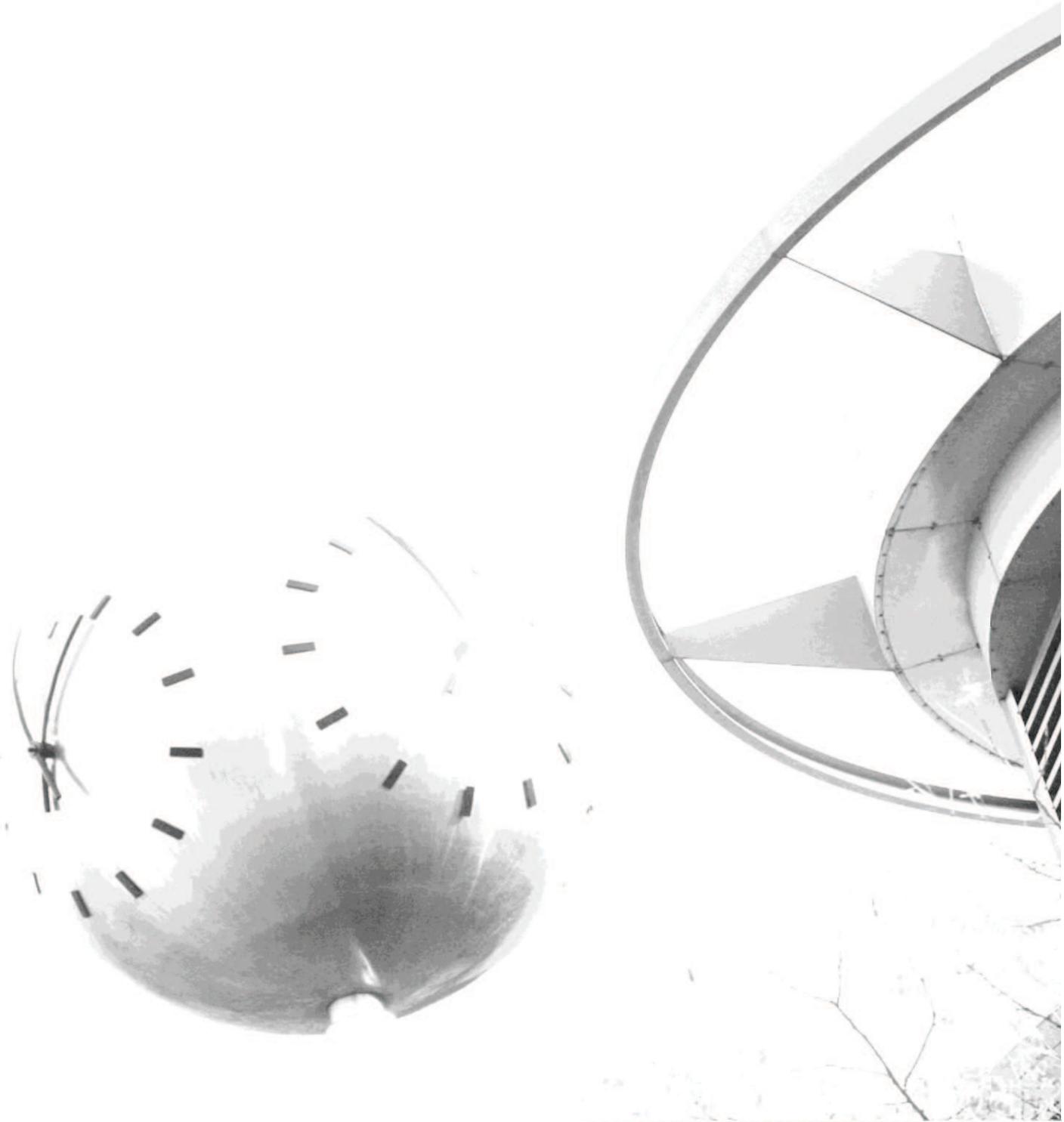


Digital Inclusion Policy

Basildon Borough Council



Key Information

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Section/Directorate: Engagement

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Internal Consultation: Range of officers and Covid-19 Policy Response and Development Working Group

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Member Level

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1. INTRODUCTION

Basildon Borough Council is committed to ensuring that residents across the borough can fully participate in the digital world that we will now live in, including e-commerce, employment that requires digital skills, and for social reasons. The Council recognises the vital role that a proactive approach to digital inclusion has to play in achieving this, and the way in which this will improve residents' wellbeing and the growth of the local economy. A Digital Inclusion Policy, delivered through a robust implementation strategy, will enable the Council to establish the full extent of the challenges in this area in this borough and take tangible steps to address them.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the information age, those who are not able to engage in the digital world are at risk of being left behind. There exists a vast inequality in relation to access to technology and this is leading to inequalities in access to opportunities, knowledge, services and goods. Basildon Council is working with partners to reduce these inequalities and this policy outlines the key areas of focus.

By having a Digital Inclusion Policy, the council will be looking to address five primary issues:

- Connectivity – helping to ensure residents have the means to connect to the internet, and that the local connection is of a sufficiently high speed for both residents and for businesses
- Accessibility – helping residents get access to devices (e.g. laptops and tablets) to connect to digital platforms and services
- Digital skills – helping residents get the skills they need to safely and effectively navigate and use digital services, and helping residents upskill and reskill to be able to increase their earnings potential and employment options
- Confidence – ensuring the borough's residents have the confidence to safely navigate online services, and know which services will be helpful to them to begin with
- Motivation – helping residents who are not currently digitally active to understand why and how the internet and digital services can be useful to them

The Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR)¹ highlighted five key benefits of Digital Inclusion:

1. Earnings: the acquisition of digital skills can increase an employee's earnings by 3-10%.
2. Employment: digital skills can improve the chances of employment and increase the likelihood that an individual who is economically inactive may look for work.
3. Retail: research shows that online shopping is up to 13% cheaper than shopping in-store.
4. Wellbeing: digital communication can increase wellbeing by enabling individuals to connect and communicate more frequently.
5. Time: it is estimated that around 30 minutes can be saved per transaction by accessing services such as banking or government services online.

The Council recognises the importance of ensuring that it can respond to the current deficiencies in relation to digital inclusion and ensuring that residents and businesses can benefit from further inclusion.

Basildon Borough Council's Corporate Plan 2019-2022² sets out an ambitious vision to improve the lives of all residents. This policy supports the Corporate Promise that Basildon will become 'A place

¹ https://cebr.com/the-economic-impact-of-digital-skills-and-inclusion-in-the-uk_final/

² Basildon Borough Council Corporate Plan 2019-2022 - <https://www.basildon.gov.uk/corporate-plan>

where everyone prospers'. The corporate plan specifically lays out a commitment to improving digital skills across the borough and ensuring that everyone can take advantage of the opportunities that technology offers and this policy is supplementary to this promise. In addition to this, the Digital Inclusion Policy supports the Council's current Digital Strategy which aims to deliver digital transformation and a change in culture that creates digital capability and capacity for those who live and work in the borough.

Furthermore, COVID-19 has required the Council to deliver additional community services and this has enabled the Council to develop a more thorough understanding of digital inclusion within the borough and its impact. It has enabled the Council to better understand the scale of the challenge and the needs of residents. This policy seeks to respond to these requirements and needs, supporting the transition to a new way of life for those who are currently digitally excluded, while ensuring its residents and businesses to prosper from the identified benefits of digital technology.

3. POLICY STATEMENT

Basildon Council's ambition is to improve digital connectivity, accessibility and skills across the borough to ensure that residents' wellbeing is promoted and residents are able to contribute and benefit from existing and emerging digital technologies. A Digital Inclusion Policy will allow for a council-wide approach that prioritises each of these elements of digital inclusion. This policy seeks to provide the evidence base and rationale for the need of this and to complement the Digital Strategy currently in place.

4. CONTEXT

I. LOCAL AND NATIONAL CONTEXT

The Lloyds Bank Customer Index 2018³ found that 8% of people in the UK had zero basic digital skills and a further 12% had limited basic digital abilities. The Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR)⁴ estimate that by 2025, 7.9 million people will still lack digital skills. The importance of digital inclusion has been highlighted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in which individuals have relied heavily on technology to continue to work from home, access supplies such as shopping and government services and to communicate with friends and family. Research has shown that among 50-70 year olds, 75% say that they were making more video calls during lockdown and 31% said they were emailing more than they did before the pandemic.⁵

In June 2020, the Basildon Community Hub carried out a survey with activity centre members and sheltered scheme residents in the borough and, of 1,041 respondents, found that:

- There were more negative comments than positive made in relation to technology.
- Residents highlighted a need for upskilling – particularly in relation to banking, shopping and video calling.
- 64% of respondents stated that they currently own a digital device and the majority owned a smart phone.
- Around 30% stated that they felt access to a device is not necessary.

³https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2018-Report.pdf

⁴ <https://cebr.com/>

⁵ <https://www.ageing-better.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-08/landscape-covid-19-digital.pdf>

Though this does not represent a conclusive picture of the borough's demography, it provides an evidence base that there is likely to be a significant number of residents across the borough who do not own a digital device and/or are not aware of the opportunities that arise from owning one and/or who do not have the skills required to use devices.

II. CONNECTIVITY

The Council's local plan (Revised Publication Local Plan 2014-34) will result in the development of thousands of new premises being built in the borough which will require new infrastructure to be built. Policy COM1 Digital Communications Infrastructure Strategy, states that the Council will:

1. Seek to ensure that all homes and businesses in the borough have access to superfast broadband and 4G mobile network coverage, as a minimum.
2. Support the future roll out of new communications technologies that will ensure businesses in the borough can participate effectively in the global, national, and local economies.
3. Support the future role out of new communication technologies that will enable residents and businesses in the borough to access a broader range of service opportunities, to improve their quality of life, competitiveness and reduce the need to travel.

The Superfast Essex Programme⁶ has worked with network operators Openreach and Gigaclear to make superfast broadband available to as many homes and businesses as possible and, as of December 2020, 98.32% of premises within the borough have access to superfast (≥ 30 Mbps) broadband. This compares to 95.9% across Essex County and 97.1% across England.⁷ The work of the Superfast Essex Programme is ongoing within Basildon and is due to finish in March 2021, at which point there will be even more premises with access to superfast broadband.

The Council aims to achieve a 100% coverage of superfast broadband across the borough. In addition to the work being undertaken by the Superfast Essex Programme, the Council is in the process of securing further development through the Local Full Fibre Network's⁸ (LFFN) programme funded by central government. This will deliver full fibre to public sector locations across the borough, including Wat Tyler Country Park. The Association of South Essex Local Authorities (ASELA) has obtained an additional £2.5m in funding from the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MCHLG) to further develop fibre network. This work, along with the commitments of further investment from leading suppliers such as Openreach and Virgin Media, will result in greater coverage of ultrafast broadband (≥ 100 Mbps) across the borough.

There is also the requirement to improve the mobile network within the borough, specifically 4G and 5G coverage. The key benefits of 5G are greater connection speeds (10gbps), lower latency, and enhanced capacity that results in increased bandwidth. 5G advances the capabilities of the following:

- Internet of Things (IoT)
- Autonomous vehicles
- Drones
- Virtual Reality (VR).

⁶ <https://www.superfastessex.org/about/the-programme/>

⁷ <https://labs.thinkbroadband.com/local/E07000066>

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-full-fibre-networks-programme>

Three, the mobile telecommunications company, plans to make 5G available within the borough. There are currently 154 existing sites across the six authorities that comprise ASELA, 80% of these (124) are due for a 4G and 5G upgrade compared to the national average of just over 50%. This technology will provide even greater connectivity on the move which will benefit businesses operating in the borough. Furthermore, 5G technology is a focus of central government, and the Council will play a key role in this while looking for emerging opportunities for development.

The Council's aim is to create greater, faster connectivity through working with all identified suppliers to improve performance and create a more competitive market for high-speed connectivity with greater capacity, to then make it more affordable. Through improving the connectivity it will support the growth of a digital economy, which will improve the prosperity of the people and businesses located within the borough.

III. ACCESSIBILITY

One of the key concerns in relation to digital inclusion is an individual's ability to acquire a digital device. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of owning a digital device has become even more apparent, particularly in relation to children, young people and older residents. The Children's Commissioner reports that 9% of children and young people do not have access to a laptop and this has caused significant difficulties in facilitating online learning for children⁹.

Research conducted by the Office of National Statistics (ONS) in 2017 found that the number of devices owned by households correlates positively with the income of a household and that 8% of households who did not have internet access did not because of the costs associated with acquiring and maintaining digital equipment and devices.¹⁰ The relationship between income and owning a digital device is evident and thus should be of particular importance within Basildon. Basildon is currently ranked 111 of 317 nationally for deprivation and is the 5th most deprived borough in the East of England. Between 2007 and 2019, there was a 6% increase in the population living in the most deprived areas and 12 of Basildon's Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) are in the 10th highest deprived nationally.

While the Council has not yet fully established the full scale of access to digital devices within the borough, the findings of the Community Hub showed that 36% of sheltered scheme residents did not have access to a device. It is therefore apparent that the Council must act to ensure that older people can access digital devices where possible too. This will also ensure an increase in digital skills for residents as research indicates that those with access to their own device are more inclined to improve existing or gain new digital skills¹¹

The Council will seek to help remove financial barriers to the borough's residents accessing a digital device. By working with its partners to secure resources and highlighting local and national initiatives, the aim will be for all of the borough's residents to have the opportunity to access a digital device that is suitable for their needs.

⁹<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/18/children-without-internet-access-during-lockdown/#:~:text=Ofcom%20estimate%20that%20between%201.14,in%2010%20disadvantaged%20year%2010s.>

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/738922/Essential_digital_skills_framework.pdf#:~:text=The%20Essential%20Digital%20Skills%20Framework%20defines%20the%20skills,supporting%20adults%20to%20enhance%20their%20essential%20digital%20skills.

¹⁰ <https://bit.ly/3pfmAVI>

¹¹ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VGPYzmlz-XPuDbgBfVOGRK7yTQfJwwwx/view>

IV. DIGITAL SKILLS

According to the government's Science and Technology committee, the digital skills gap is costing the economy £63 billion a year. In strengthening the local economy, Basildon Council seeks to ensure that a lack of digital skills is not to the detriment of residents and businesses in the borough, and to build upon the skills of residents to prevent this.

The government have developed an Essential Digital Skills Framework (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/essential-digital-skills-framework>) that covers five key areas and relates to improving people's lives both in work and at home through acquiring these essential digital skills:

1. Communicating
2. Handling information and content
3. Transacting
4. Problem Solving
5. Being safe and legal online

The Council will adopt this framework, using it to develop initiatives in response to the issue of digital isolation caused by the lack of digital skills. It will be the aim of the Council to ensure anyone that participates in initiatives related to the delivery of the outcomes of the Council's Digital Inclusion policy have the opportunity to acquire the recognised essential digital skills detailed within the Government's framework.

The ONS found that 86% of the population in the South East of England possess these five basic digital skills.¹² Further to this, in the survey conducted by the Community Hub with older residents, upskilling was clearly an identified requirement with areas of interest being banking, shopping, physical activity, and video calling.

Evidence shows that digital skills are influenced by disability, and the ONS reported in 2019 that only 78% of disabled people access the internet, compared to 92% of non-disabled people.¹³ Basildon has a higher-than-average percentage of residents who identify as being disabled compared to national and wider Essex averages.¹⁴ Further to this, the Council's baseline community data shows that only 66% of Basildon residents rate their general health as good, the third lowest percentage in Essex, and below the England average of 70%. The Council must seek to engage those within the borough who are disabled to promote digital skills and increase access.

The Council will therefore take an inclusive approach to all initiatives that are focused on improving residents' digital skills.

6. OUTCOMES

The aim of this policy is to achieve the following outcomes for the borough:

- Improved digital skills across the borough through providing greater opportunities to acquire new skills at home and in the work place

¹²<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04>

¹³

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04>

¹⁴ <https://bit.ly/38oqWCW>

- That all residents can benefit from the opportunities of existing and emerging technology through a greater understanding of the benefits of modern technology
- Residents have greater access to digital devices through removal of financial barriers
- Improved connectivity through a full fibre and 5G network across the borough
- 100% coverage of superfast broadband across the borough
- The identified benefits of digital technology will be accessible by all with no resident being excluded

7. LINKS TO OTHER CORPORATE POLICIES/PARTNER DOCUMENTS/LEGISLATION

- Corporate Plan 2019-2022 – Believe in Basildon
- Digital Strategy
- Employment and Skills Strategy
- Financial Inclusion and Resilience Policy
- Economic Development Policy
- Local Plan 2013-2024
- Economic Development Strategy
- Commercial Strategy
- Health and Wellbeing Policy and Strategy

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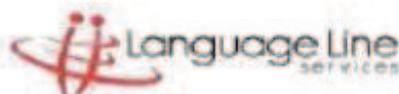
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